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Improving Arts Education Partnerships

Arts education in the nation's public schools is facing challenges despite strong public support and growing evidence of its wide-ranging benefits. Educational initiatives such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act do not include accountability measures for arts education. This has prompted schools to shift instructional time and resources from the arts to other subjects. A recent survey of 82 school districts in Los Angeles County revealed that most districts dedicated less than 1 percent of their budget to arts education.

One of the strategies adopted by schools to improve arts education is to tap the expertise of local community arts organizations. In 1999, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) approved a ten-year, multi-million-dollar program in arts education in four major disciplines—dance, music, theater, and visual arts—for all students in kindergarten through grade 12. A core component of the plan is to build partnerships with community arts organizations to develop and provide programs to enhance the study of the arts. The California Arts Council asked the RAND Corporation to examine these partnerships.

Arts partnerships have a long history of providing educational resources for schools, such as access to performances, student field trips to museums, student workshops, professional development for teachers, and artist-in-residence programs that place artists in schools for extended periods. Arts partnerships have been broadly defined as one of two types. In a simple-transaction partnership, arts organizations are providers of arts programming and schools are consumers. The school does not participate meaningfully in the design of the program, and the arts organization does little or no needs assessment for the school. This type of partnership is associated with one-time arts programs that provide students and teachers with merely exposure to the arts. In a joint-venture partnership, school staff and the arts organization work

Abstract

Although arts education enjoys public support and has been shown to help school children in many ways, it has recently become marginalized through budget cuts and redirection of resources to other subjects. One way to supplement arts education is through partnerships between schools and arts organizations. This research found that joint-venture partnerships can yield many benefits but are less common than simple-transaction partnerships in which schools typically select prepared programs without a needs assessment. Transaction relationships have fewer benefits, but can be improved in many ways.

together to define educational goals and needs and collaboratively develop a program. Such collaboration is more likely to result in arts programs of greater educational value.

Study Approach

Unlike recent research that has focused on successful joint ventures, RAND researchers selected a sample of schools and arts organizations to portray how arts partnerships actually function in a large urban school district. The researchers interviewed (1) principals and teachers from a stratified random sample of 11 elementary schools participating in an LAUSD arts education program, (2) arts advisors from ten of eleven local districts who are working to help implement the plan, and (3) directors of 34 local arts organizations providing arts education programming to schools. Participants were asked about their arts partnership goals and interactions and the challenges to and facilitators of the partnerships.

Findings

Partnership Goals. Schools and arts organizations shared a common goal of developing students, although both tended to express this goal in terms of exposing students to the arts rather than developing their knowledge of or skills in the arts. Schools and arts organizations also had some notably different goals for their partnerships. Schools emphasized providing professional development for teachers, a goal rarely mentioned by arts organizations. Promoting public awareness and appreciation of the arts was the goal most often mentioned by arts organizations; promoting their organizations was another frequently mentioned goal.

Partnership Interactions. Partnerships were usually simple transactions rather than joint ventures. The arts organizations developed programs without input from schools and offered them for a fee or sometimes for free. Schools selected from such programs, often using nothing more than promotional brochures. Communication between school staff and arts organizations tended to occur only after program selection and primarily to resolve logistical issues such as scheduling or transportation. Neither the arts organizations nor the schools conducted a needs assessment to inform program development, and programs were rarely linked or integrated with school curriculum. Although district arts advisors can be liaisons between arts organizations and schools, arts organizations rarely consulted them and they did not advise schools on program selections.

Challenges and Facilitators of Partnerships. Both schools and arts organizations indicated that insufficient funding and limited time for instruction and communication between teachers and organizations hindered even simple partnerships. Both cited challenges reflecting a lack of information and understanding about the others' organizational needs and limitations. Grade-appropriate arts programs integrated with the school curriculum were the facilitator most commonly cited by schools. Arts organization directors did not cite this as a facilitator and indicated they rarely offer programs linked to school curriculum. Rather, they listed personal relationships with school staff and teacher commitment and enthusiasm as critical facilitators. School staff did not seem to be as interested in building relationships as they were in accessing individuals and information that would help them select and schedule programs.

Recommendations

Given the pervasiveness of simple-transaction relationships, and the difficulties of developing more-complex interactions, schools and arts organizations should work to improve the educational value of

simple transactions, even though more-sophisticated partnerships may have greater potential for educational impact.

- **Establish partnerships that address the goals of both schools and arts organizations.** Although the needs of students and schools have been emphasized as being central to the goals of arts education, the needs of arts organizations are of equal importance to a partnership's growth and sustainability. The potential of arts education partnerships to establish the arts as a core subject will not be realized unless schools and organizations understand how their goals interconnect.
- **Focus on teachers.** Given their limited resources, schools and arts organizations should focus available resources on developing teachers. Teacher support is critical to the success of arts partnerships. Investing in teachers can also help disseminate program benefits widely to students, other teachers, members of the community, and potentially to other schools when teachers change jobs.
- **Use program selection to improve available programming.** As the consumers in a simple-transaction partnership, schools can shape available programming to better meet their needs through their choice of programs.
- **Provide comprehensive and user-friendly information.** Arts organizations require comprehensive information about schools' needs, organizational structures and goals, curricula, and available funding in order to design educational programs. Schools require accessible and relevant information on arts organizations to select programs providing the best fit with school needs.
- **Enhance the "brokering" role for local district arts advisors.** Both schools and arts organizations tend to be highly diverse and decentralized. The local district arts advisors have the potential to provide much-needed guidance to schools that are looking for ways to evaluate arts programs and to arts organizations that are working to develop programming that addresses schools' needs.

Policy Implications

The most significant policy implication of this study is that schools must assume responsibility for creating a coherent, standards-based arts curriculum and become better-informed consumers of arts programs. Even within the context of a well-designed and ambitious program, development of complex partnerships may be impractical and inefficient. Finding ways to make simple-transaction partnerships work more effectively may ultimately enable many schools and arts organizations struggling with limited resources to make a lasting impact on school reform. ■

This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Arts Education Partnerships: Lessons Learned from One School District's Experience* by Melissa K. Rowe, Laura Werber Castaneda, Tessa Kaganoff, and Abby Robyn, MG-222-EDU, 2004, 114 pages, available online at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG222/>. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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